Reading Mosques: Meaning and Architecture in Islam

The expression ‘reading architecture’ should not seem too odd, as one of the best known examples of architecture, the church, has often been likened to a book, and in entering, for example, the little Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, one feels as if one were leafing through the pages of a miniature novel that narrates a story one should not forget. This article applies the notion of reading architecture to mosques by offering a reading of this type of architecture that pays particular attention to the symbols and metaphors embodied in most mosques. Although users of mosques may not be conscious of these architectural symbols, I believe that the buildings they experience have significance and unique aesthetic value for them largely because of these elements. The mosque is one of the most common types of building, and its presence in the diversity of cultures that participated in the complex historical developments of the Islamic world makes it difficult to produce a general account. Nevertheless, this article will try to analyze certain symbolic features that have been—and still continue to be—common in most kinds of mosques.

1. ARCHITECTURE AND MEANING

The use of metaphors and other symbols in architectural design and interpretation is not peculiar to Islam. Western architecture and architectural discourse are full of examples of buildings whose meaning is partially determined by symbols. In relation to architecture, the terms ‘representation’ or ‘symbol’ have been more commonly used by philosophers, as in the case of Nelson Goodman’s provocatively titled essay “How Buildings Mean.”1 On the other hand, many architects and architectural critics have couched their analyses of the meanings of buildings in terms of “metaphors.” For example, Denis Hollier has demonstrated how George Bataille uses the notion of metaphor to show the political nature of architecture.2 Hugh Pearman, in his book Contemporary World Architecture, has stressed the metaphoric qualities of religious architecture in various cultures.3 Christian Norberg-Schulz, who treats the history of architecture as a search for meaning, has also highlighted the use of symbols in Western architecture, noting that Le Corbusier’s use of mechanical metaphors in his architectural and urban designs and the cosmic implications of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux’s projects are well known.4 Postmodern architects have used symbols and metaphors to render architecture socially and historically significant, and discussion of these elements has constituted the main subject of postmodern architectural discourse and criticism. Charles Jencks’s writings, for example, have focused mainly on such issues.5 Charles Moore’s Piazza d’Italia, Aldo Rossi’s architecture employing the concept of the “analogical city,” and Hans Hollein’s projects that try to create “architectural landscapes” can be cited as examples of projects that make use of symbols and metaphors. Even a more structurally oriented architect like Norman Foster has used metaphors to describe his work, as in the case of the Millau Viaduct, which he likens to a butterfly.6 Interestingly, contemporary Western architects who have built mosques have made use of common Islamic metaphors. The postmodern architect Paolo Portoghesi’s mosque in Rome is a well-known example. Symbols and metaphors have been particularly attractive to Muslim scholars and writers, who have traditionally avoided precise literal
expressions in any realm, believing that the human mind could not fathom the infinite meanings of the world. This idea was based on a religious understanding of the world that held that God cannot be defined. This "medieval" disposition, seeing constant changes and multidimensionality in what is observed, had a strong aesthetic aspect because it kept Islamic thinkers attentive to perceptual qualities. Moreover, the Islamic view of the world, within which the architecture of the mosque developed, is influenced by a sense of adoration for the creations of God. Such adoration renders everything with the emotion of love, leading to empathy and giving rise to an aesthetic relation to the world. Consequently, all Islamic artworks, including Islamic architecture and specifically the architecture of mosques, need to be understood and appraised in terms of the symbols that are embodied therein. This has long been understood in the Muslim world. Indeed, some of the ideas I employ to explain the architecture of mosques were drawn from the dictated architectural records of the greatest of Ottoman architects, Sinan, who was active in the Ottoman court during the sixteenth century. In these records, written mostly in poetic form, Sinan describes mosques using numerous metaphors and similes: "In every corner is a rose garden of Paradise. . . . Those who its marbles see would think (themselves) in a sea of elegance. . . . Each of those variegated arches resembles a rainbow."8

II. HISTORY, USE, MEANING

Islam, which appeared in the seventh century, took its initial artistic forms from existing Christian architecture and decorations.9 The first Islamic religious monument, The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, in spite of its original form, is nevertheless decorated with mosaics inspired by Byzantine patterns.10 However, within a short period, several factors, such as social norms, structural exigencies, religious practices, and climate, created the possibility for various original mosque configurations around the Mediterranean, where Islam had spread with great speed. Islamic prayer does not require a specific edifice, as prayer can be observed anywhere as long as one faces Mecca. Although the Prophet had warned against the futile show of riches and materiality in this world, prayer in communion is important, since Islam claims to be a religion of equality and communality. Moreover, in Arabic, the word for beauty has the same root with the words 'wholeness' or 'community.' Thus, large intensively decorated mosques were built in all Islamic lands. The first mosques are in the form of multicolunmed (hypostyle) structures where the space in front of the Mihrab (a kind of altar pointing toward Mecca) was covered with a dome whose interior surface would usually be decorated with plaster stalactites that created a play of light, symbolizing the heavens.11

The mosque was not only a place for prayer, but, in its early phase, it also served as the communal meeting place and as a place for judiciary court meetings under the supervision of the imam. The hypostyle hall, which was usually a rectangle with the short axis toward the mihrab, was entered from an open courtyard surrounded by arcades. This courtyard would also be used for prayer when the congregation was large. This type of mosque is called "Great Mosque," from which different varieties were to evolve in the sundry lands where Islam spread.

I discuss four types of symbols in my analysis of mosques. The most common, found in all types of mosques throughout history, refers to "paradise." The second, what I refer to as "the heavenly theater," is related to the unique function of the mosque as the place for communal prayer. Except for the imam who performs the prayer with the community, there are no actors or rituals for the faithful to watch. Thus, the interior of a mosque is an empty space, a stage for prayer which is performed through bodily movements of prostration. This turns the interior into a space of performance. Third, mosques are often understood as "urban sculptures" that guide visitors through cities. "The cosmic spiral" is the final symbol that is common to many structures, forms, and decorations in the Islamic world and relates to a medieval understanding of time and space.

III. PARADISE REGAINED

The image for the ideal place has usually been "paradise." Although the notion of paradise is common to most religions, the sacred book of Islam, the Koran, and popular Muslim culture stress the idea of paradise almost beyond any other. All mosques have tried to create an atmosphere
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that refers by analogy to a conception of paradise. Moreover, the Islamic world is considered by the faithful to be the land of peace, “Dar-el-Islam,” as opposed to lands where anarchy and war reign, “Dar-el-Harp.” Consequently, the mosque should be an ideal place where all tensions are brought to equilibrium and harmonized. An attempt is made to reference this quality in mosques through the apparent equilibrium of structural forces. Ideally, in a mosque, all tensile forces are integrated to create an atmosphere of harmony. As Augusto Romano Burelli states in relation to the mosques of Sinan, “the purpose of decoration is not the making-explicit of chosen constructive details, but rather [by] masking and blurring of the constructive procedure followed, … decoration tends to function as a reconciler of opposites.”12 One can understand this better by comparing the structure of a mosque with that of a Christian monument or church, where the dynamism and the constant movement of contrary forces are singled out as an aesthetic quality. In the Western world, humans create their own destiny by opposing contrary forces with will and power. In the Islamic world, however, it is believed that humans are born into a perfect world and that the mosque should represent this perfect world, while also referring to the afterlife that is promised to the faithful. A statement from Burelli perfectly illustrates this for the mosques of Sinan:

The space of the mosques of Sinan is [a] metaphor for Islamic paradise. In the 97 verses of the Koran in which paradise is described, there is one which describes the enchantment of the paradisiacal space more strikingly than the others. “But for those who follow their duty to their God, for them there are lofty rooms with lofty halls above them … beneath which rivers flow. . . . [There they rest,] sojourning in gardens where they will.” (Sura XXXIX, 20-73-74)13

According to Islam, humanity has destroyed the perfect world initially given by God. In mosques, an attempt is made to recreate this perfection or make people remember it primarily through symbols and expressions such as calligraphy, decoration, and the structure of mosques, as well as through certain other aesthetic designs that refer to the promised paradise.

Besides the structural harmony attained by solving and concealing tensions to create an atmosphere of peacefulness, the use of light has been an extremely important physical and spiritual reference to heaven. Although, throughout history, different mosque designs employed light differently because of the restrictions of their structures, light has always—and in all cultures—referred to a sacred and spiritual force, often to God. It could be that the most perfect and generous use of light in mosques belong to Ottoman mosques of the sixteenth century, which, like Gothic cathedrals, do not have load-bearing walls. The baldachin structure of sixteenth-century Ottoman mosques allows for windows to be opened in its walls at all elevations. This is because the structure depends on columns and arches. There are also windows around the drum of the dome, allowing light to enter the interior from all sides and levels. In spite of this profusion of light coming from all directions, any directionality of light is avoided. At all times of day the quality of light is such that one never knows where the sun is. The overall light effect is provided by double windows, by grates on the outside, and by stained glass. As Burelli states, “the internal space given over to prayers must be perfectly visible in all its points, unsecret and revealed . . . [while] conceal[ing] from the worshippers the position of the sun in the heavens.”14

Other features that are related to paradise are the decorations on the mihrab and on the exterior wall of the portico (the arcaded entrance section also used by latecomers for prayer). As the faithful look toward the mihrab niche, they often face decorations that symbolize the opening to the paradise garden. In the portico of the Rüstem Paşa Mosque in Istanbul (c. 1560), tiles that depict a garden of flowers symbolize paradise. The Green Mosque in Bursa has a mihrab that is decorated with blue tiles on which yellow and gold flowers have been painted. We can extend these examples indefinitely, from the early mosques in northern Africa all the way to those in Andalusia in southern Spain.

Two other types of symbols found in mosques that refer to paradise are the presence of water and images of forests. In the Seljuk medreses, which also served for religious rituals and meetings, there used to be a small pool under the oculus of the dome, collecting rainwater and reflecting the sky; often a spiral incision into the pavement near the pool would symbolize the universe. In the early Ottoman mosques in Bursa, the first hall under the dome would also contain a little fountain with running water. The Great Mosque
in Bursa dating from 1300 has in its very center a large pool with sprinkling water, used also for ablution. The famous mosque of Sinan in Edirne (Adrianopolis) also has a small fountain right in the middle of the interior. Ablution fountains of the Süleymaniye Mosque in Istanbul (1557), built by Sinan for Suleiman the Magnificent, are located in the exterior walls of the building, creating a physical bond with the building and referring to the rivers of paradise. It has often been suggested that the Great Mosque type, with a hypostyle hall boasting many columns, such as the wooden mosques built in Anatolia by the Seljuks (c. 1100–1300) or the Great Mosque of Cordoba (786–788) with its hundreds of columns and superimposed horseshoe arches, represents or symbolizes the forest. For a culture that first developed in the desert lands of Arabia, both water and flora have special value. This is the reason why green is almost a sacred color for Islam and why the presence of water in the mosques is of special value. Thus, by the inclusion of many visual and sensory references to paradise, the mosque is experienced as a metaphor for it in every sense.

IV. HEAVENLY THEATER

The ritual of prayer observed in congregation is a performance of adoration and prostration to God, the “all-seeing.” The sight of prayer in a mosque, either of a single individual or of a group, will make it obvious that the whole interior space, designed to be clearly visible and homogeneous in all of its parts, is conceived as a stage for the observance of a performance. The interiors of mosques have no furnishings, except for carpets covering the floor and the minbar, a high platform or staircase upon which the imam faces the congregation. In this bare space, the proportions of architectural elements such as columns and arches and the different scales of verticality are often calculated to complement the human body, which is picked out as an actor to be watched.

In comparison to the conception of space configured through linear perspective, which creates a scene as if through a window, in a mosque the congregation is placed at the center of the structure so as to sense its space as if it revolves around them. The congregation is thus made part of the performance, both watching and being watched. This reflects the idea that God is everywhere and is always watching. The whole world is there for the enjoyment of God, who is to be adored and worshipped, and the main purpose of prayer is to represent this direct relation with God, to offer oneself to the gaze of God as a worshipper of God.

In this performance, the bodily relationship with architecture becomes vital and physically real. Before entering the mosque, a cleaning ritual is observed at the ablution fountains: The feet, the face, and the ears are washed and, before entering the mosque, the shoes are removed. Before the prayer, the body is prepared and cleansed. This practice readies the body for both active participation and heightened perception. One feels the floor under one’s feet, and during the prayer one’s forehead to the floor several times. In this bare interior the voice of the imam and the sounds of water (if there are fountains) are made to be heard and appreciated in the best way. In many of the mosques of Sinan, water jugs have been placed in the domes to absorb echoes so that the call to prayer and the sounds of the prayers themselves are heard in the clearest and most aesthetically pleasing way possible. When the prayer is observed in congregation, the bodily presence and perception become even more acute. In addition, being close to the floor accentuates the perception of movements of the body and intensifies the perception of sounds.

Great architects throughout the world have been especially sensitive to the fact that architecture can impose certain physical and psychological attitudes on the user. For example, ascending and descending ceremonial staircases, as in the case of opera houses or palaces, demand a certain bodily position to adapt to this ceremonial atmosphere, while period furniture requires not only certain ways of sitting and standing but appropriately harmonious clothes to go with it. Louis XVI interiors are striking examples of this phenomenon. Similarly, changes in the disposition of the body often occur when entering an interior from an open space. This change can be accentuated architecturally. The very sensitive architect Alvar Aalto made users conscious of this change by creating special light conditions at the entrances of his buildings. More generally, this shift in the change of location from exterior to interior and the many different implications it can have often have been emphasized through specific designs applied on gates and doors. In mosques, entrances are designed, decorated, and even covered with special inscriptions to prepare people for the special experience of the heavenly theater that lies inside.
V. URBAN SCULPTURE

The Ottomans, who ruled over the Islamic world for about 700 years, created an architecture which was open to the exterior and developed a type of mosque that stood out in the urban space as a sculptural form. Mogul mausoleums were similar to Ottoman mosques in that the form was to be seen from all four directions. The most famous of these mausoleums are the Taj Mahal, the mausoleum of Haydar in Delhi, and that of Akbar near Agra. These last two can be understood as urban sculptures. On the other hand, sixteenth-century Ottoman mosques were designed with a specific urban development project in mind. They were positioned in the city to be viewed from specific distances and venues and visually related to each other in the urban landscape. For example, the great mosque of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1557), placed right above the Golden Horn in Istanbul, acts as a welcoming façade to the city just above the harbor. Entering the Golden Horn, one is confronted with the view of the Suleymaniye Mosque, which hovers above the port. It is believed that the monument was illuminated at night and would act as a beacon to the night traffic on the sea. The religious monument seeming from the distance as a composite sculptural form that could almost be held in one’s palm is a perfect symbol, a perfect object, which creates the visual focus for the city. Many sixteenth-century Ottoman mosques have a pyramidal form that accentuates their sculptural aspect. Thus, architecture of this sort, understood as urban sculpture, directly addresses itself to our bodily and mobile sense in the city, as it connects to our sense of erectness and guides our orientation in the city. With spiritual and mnemonic implications, the mosque that is perceived and experienced as an urban sculpture becomes an important asset to the city, offering guidance and creating cultural and social references. As the Ottoman mosque is transformed into an urban sculpture, it contributes to the observer’s sense of familiarity with the city and creates a sense of human scale, giving the observer the feeling of belonging.

VI. THE COSMIC SPIRAL

The spiral, as a form that is both three-dimensional and that has no beginning and no end, is the basic formal principle on which the understanding of space and time and the related arts are based in Islam.16 In contrast to the Vitruvian principle of symmetry and the spatial understanding related to linear perspective, which are influential in the West, in Islam, both auditory and visual forms take their organizing principle from the spiral.17 If we listen to oriental Islamic music, we shall hear unending repetitions and circular progressions. Likewise, analyses of space in mosques and in religious architectural sites show that structural elements as well as spatial units are arranged in circular form, enveloping and circumscribing each other like water rings around a falling stone.

This spiraling formation of the structure and the placement of architectural units in a group of buildings, such as architectural complexes, are most apparent in sixteenth-century Ottoman architecture. As mentioned previously, this becomes obvious when we are trying to reach an Ottoman mosque in the city. A comparison between the approach to the great mosque of Suleymaniye in Istanbul and the approach to a Christian basilica, such as St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, is revealing in this respect. In the former, although we see the building in all its monumentality from a distance, as we come near, we are led through labyrinth streets, and access to the entrance of the mosque becomes possible only after spiraling toward it. In Rome, after a certain point, a straight path, creating a linear perspective, will lead us directly to the front of St. Peter’s.

The above example of circular paths around a mosque is similar to the circularly arranged structural elements that support many monuments. Especially in structures where the dome spans a wide opening, there are several enveloping layers of structural elements, concentrically placed, that make it possible to enlarge the interior space as well as to stabilize the structure. In an architectural complex containing different public buildings, such as the mosque, the medreses (colleges), the hamam (bath), the hospital, the hospice, the soup house, the stables, the latrines, and several courtyards in between, these elements are arranged in enveloping concentric circular form. A perfect example of this is again the Suleymaniye Mosque in Istanbul.18

This spiral configuration, used both in architecture and the placement of buildings in an architectural complex, has several functions that relate to perception and to the aesthetic appraisal. The first would be that sacred or religious spaces are not
properly entered directly, but only after respectfully circling around them. Another more subtle meaning in relation to the use of spiral forms would be how the movement of the body and its experience could refer to both cosmic and spiritual movements. As one turns in circles in space, similar to the movements of the whirling dervishes and the revolutions of the planets, one has a very different sense of space, and the body becomes in tune with the environment. Barbara Montero claims that the perception of movement in the body, in joints and muscles, which is referred to as "proprioception," can have an aesthetic meaning. Thus, circulation patterns forced by the architecture of mosques, perceived as the body moves around in them, constitute one of the important aesthetic aspects of Islamic architecture and urban planning, aspects which literally embody metaphor.

Besides the spiral, which is understood and valued as a cosmic and spiritual form, the relations between the circle, the square, and the triangle also constitute a basic forms metaphor in the structure and decoration in Islamic religious buildings. The circle symbolizes the perfect form and relates to the heavens and to God, while the square, with its four directions, relates to human existence and to the world. Most Islamic geometric decoration of polygons and stars is derived from the rotation of the square within the circle. This relationship can also be observed in the basic forms of the mosque, especially in the mosques where the structures have developed through several centuries, such as Ottoman mosques. In these, the spherical shape of the dome and the prismatic shape of the building are symbolic representations of the square moving within the circle. The Ottoman mosque and its decorations are thus perfect expressions of the synthesis of the world of man and the realm of God. However, this polarity can also be understood as practicality and spirituality, as mind and body, or as earth and world, similar to the way these oppositions had been interpreted by Martin Heidegger.

VII. CONCLUSION

The use of symbols in mosques is related to a more fundamental feature of both Islamic architecture and other Islamic artworks. In certain forms of Oriental music, although a certain rhythmic style called "maqam" would be chosen for each performance, each new execution of this "maqam" would be varied in adaptation to the actual conditions, very much like jazz music. Similarly, in Islamic architecture, no matter how much a building conforms to a set, preexisting plan, its final form will vary according to the actual conditions of site, topography, patron, and local traditions. Moreover, buildings will be designed to be appreciated as they undergo constantly changing conditions which daily and annually produce changes of mood and atmosphere. According to Cafer Efendi, the author of the book on Mehmet Efendi, the architect of the Blue Mosque, the value of this mosque lay in the way it offered unlimi- tedly changing views to the eye, as its elements could be seen differently from each different van- tage point. Explaining the aesthetics of mosques through symbols reinforces this characteristic, as each symbol can be read differently according to the changing experience and imagination of each observer. Thus, because of their embedded symbols, the meaning of a mosque is to a degree open-ended and constructed anew by each observer according to her knowledge of these symbols.

The use of metaphors and other symbols to interpret Islamic architecture has been common throughout the Muslim world. In Islam, as in many premodern cultures, certain ideas take the form of historically persistent symbols. This article has tried to show that many valued experiences of Islamic architecture are grounded in meanings of which an observer may not be fully conscious, and that to be fully appreciated mosques must be "read." Sometimes architectural metaphors are universal, and other times they are culturally specific. Thus, while for all cultures certain types of buildings, such as temples or houses, may have a similar meaning, other buildings, because they contain specific symbols associated with specific cultural traditions, can be understood only within that context. For example, as opposed to the idea of paradise for mosques, the use of the body of Christ can be shown as the basis for church plans. To read a mosque and understand how it differs from a church, it is necessary to understand the culturally specific metaphors found in its architecture.

As stated in the beginning of this article, except for a few symbols, such as those referencing paradise and the heavenly theater that are intrinsic to the idea of the mosque, not every mosque makes use of the same set of symbols. However,
I have tried to show how mosque architecture is essentially connected to symbols and myths (and indeed to some specific symbols) and that, therefore, to properly appreciate a mosque, it must be read with them in mind. In any case, it is helpful to understand the underlying Islamic approach to the world and how that approach generates a set of ideas and images that should shape our experience of mosques.24

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2. Denis Hollier, Against Architecture: The Writings of George Bataille, trans. Betsy Wing (MIT Press, 1992). Hollier also points out that architectural terms constitute the basis of many metaphors found in philosophy and other fields, arguing that “architecture . . . always represents something other than itself from the moment it becomes distinguished from mere building. . . . [T]his encroachment by an irreducibly metaphorical situation, with architecture defined as the representation of something else, extends to language, where architectural metaphors are very common. There is the façade, generally concealing some sordid reality; there is the secret, hidden architecture itself that one discovers . . . in the universe itself where one acknowledges the creator’s unified plan; pillars are not all literally pillars of the church; keystones prevent systems (whether political, philosophical, or scientific) from collapsing; to say nothing of foundations” (pp. 31–32).